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## Congress Diverts Unwanted E-Mail

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Congress is becoming more adept at stemming the tide of e-mail bound for Capitol Hill, using technology to filter junk messages and facilitate alternative online communications with constituents, a study released Wednesday found.

In 2001, U.S. congressional offices waded through a daily average of 320,000 e-mails, an increase from 2000 of 78 percent for House offices and 22 percent in the Senate, according to the Congress Online Project, a two-year program funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

At the time, the Project and lawmakers warned that, left unchecked, the amount of spam and misdirected e-mail - in addition to normal levels of postal mail - threatened to undermine lawmakers' abilities to respond to constituent concerns.

More than halfway through this year, however, that trend has slowed considerably - at least in the House. Based on volume for the first six months 2002, the amount of e-mail headed for the House is projected to increase just 2.5 percent, according to the latest Congress Online Project survey.

The Senate, which has not been quite as aggressive in combating unwanted e-mail, is projected to receive 24 percent more e-mail than last year, the study found. However, the Senate is in the midst of replacing its 12-year-old e-mail system with a more configurable Microsoft-based service, a process the House finished more than four years ago.

"Clearly Congress is doing a much better job at taming the e-mail monster," said Brad Fitch, deputy director of the nonpartisan Congressional Management Foundation, which is steering the project with researchers from The George Washington University.

One reason for the decline is that many congressional offices have turned off their direct e-mail addresses and are encouraging visitors to send messages through special forms on their official Web sites. By verifying a visitor's ZIP code and other identifying data, the Web forms can screen all e-mail from non-constituents.

All metropolitan-area federal lawmakers in the House and Senate use Web-based e-mail forms that are restricted to constituents within their governing ZIP codes.

The Web-only forms also insulate offices from receiving e-mails blasted out to all 535 members of Congress. To date, 66 Senators and 226 House members have stopped using public e-mail addresses, the survey said.

Many of those offices also are now using e-mail filters to weed out potential spammers.

The filtering system installed at New Mexico Democratic Senator Jeff Bingaman's offices accepts e-mail that appears to have been sent from his home state. The filters reject roughly half of the 1,000 e-mails destined for Bingaman's office each week, yet the office still receives about 200 e-mails from non-constituents weekly, a spokeswoman said.

In an effort to preempt some constituent queries, a number of lawmakers - including Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) and Sen. Don Nickles (R-Okla.) - regularly post updated statements on the top issues that constituents call or write

in about each week.

Honda spokesman Ruben Pulido said e-mail now accounts for 70 percent of the correspondence the congressman receives.

Rep. Zach Wamp's (R-Tenn.) Web form keeps track of frequent correspondents using "cookies," small text files that allow Web sites to detect repeat visitors.

These changes are partly in response to Congress' own mandates, which have urged the public to rely more on e-mail as the most effective means of communicating with political leaders. After Sept. 11, congressional offices asked constituents to avoid sending snail mail - which often takes more than a month to process through irradiation and security checks.

There is ample evidence that the American electorate has taken that message to heart.

An April 2002 report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 23 million people sent comments to public officials about policy choices last year. And if the Congress Online Project's estimates hold true for the remainder of 2002, Capitol Hill offices will field roughly 147 million e-mails this year.

Barkley Kern, chief operating officer for Capitol Advantage, an online grassroots advocacy firm that creates Web sites and e-mail campaigns for special interest groups, said the volume of e-mail his company has sent through its client sites has risen 54 percent since last year.

The company builds Web sites that allow activists to send messages to their Congress members in the format used on the particular lawmakers' site.

"There's a sincere interest on the part of elected officials to make this system work," Kern said. "They do value communications from their constituents, and that's why they've been putting so much work into building these systems."

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